

SOFTWARE LABS

Office Suites

Every PC needs an office suite, but does that mean you have to spend hundreds of pounds on Microsoft Office? Karl Wright compares the latest suites to see if Office is the best choice

Whether you want to write a novel, run your own business or simply organise your private life, a good office suite can make the job easier and help you get it done quicker. However, the only office suite most people know about is Microsoft Office – and it costs hundreds of pounds. In this Labs review we've looked at a selection of office suites, including Microsoft Office, to see which is really the best – and whether there's a product for the rest of us who don't have piles of cash lying around.

Just because we think you should be able to get good software without breaking the bank, that doesn't mean we advocate lowering your standards. There are certain criteria that we expect all office software to meet before we can even consider recommending it. The first is that it should support Microsoft Office file formats. Even if you switch to an alternative office suite, most of the rest of the world won't, so unless your office software can read

and modify Microsoft Office files, you won't be able to share files with friends and colleagues.

Although the exact programs you require will differ from user to user, we expect each suite to contain a good word processor and spreadsheet, no matter what else it includes. A good office suite should also be easy to use, which inevitably means that it should look and work a bit like the equivalent Microsoft programs that most people are already used to. If you intend to use the software in your business, will the suite you choose integrate well with your other software, including any back-end programs you run on your server? What kind of support does it come with? Does it include more business-focused functions, such as proper version management?

Finally, take a good look at the price of any software you're considering. Some of the budget suites are not as flashy as Microsoft Office, but they can do most of the same things and cost less than £50.

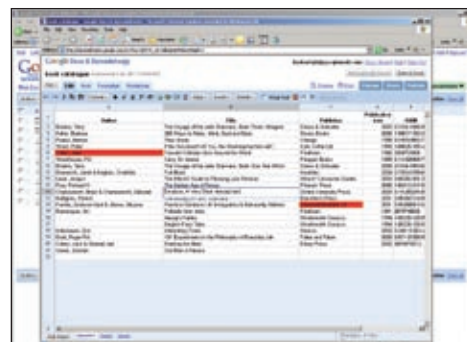
Free and easy Google Docs & Spreadsheets

If paying less for an office suite isn't good enough, you could go the whole hog and pay nothing at all. Google has made Google Docs & Spreadsheets, an online word processor and spreadsheet, available for free. Rather than installing these programs on your PC, you run them in your web browser from the internet. To find them, go to www.google.com and click on the 'more' link to the left of the search box. On the following page, click Docs & Spreadsheets in the right-hand column. You'll need a Google Mail account to use the software, but anyone can sign up for one of these now (in the past a current user had to invite you). To get an account, simply click on the 'Sign in' link in the top right-hand corner of the Google front page, and on the next page click on 'Create an account now'.

To get started with Docs & Spreadsheets, either upload an existing document or create a new one. Docs & Spreadsheets supports Microsoft Office 97-2003 files formats, as well as OpenOffice and StarOffice formats. If you want to upload a document from another office suite, you'll have to save it as a rich text file (RTF), a text file or, in the case of spreadsheets, a comma-separated value (CSV) text file.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Once you have loaded your file into the relevant application, you can work with it as you would if it were open in a normal program installed on your PC. As you'd expect, the programs are much less sophisticated than their desktop rivals. The word processor has only one toolbar, with buttons for the most important formatting options. It's good enough for producing a credible letter or editing an existing document, but we wouldn't recommend using it as your main word processor, not least because it lacks a spellchecker. The spreadsheet looks similarly basic, but we were impressed by how well it handled Excel formulae. As well as



▲ Google's free online word processor and spreadsheet are basic but perfectly good for occasional use

doing some basic maths, we used the spreadsheet to calculate a running balance, count the number of cells containing a numerical value, work out averages and calculate percentages; it handled the lot. Not bad at all for a free online application.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect is that you can allow others to access and edit your documents. We wouldn't suggest that you use Google Docs & Spreadsheet to share confidential business documents, but if you run a club or society it's an easy way to share information online and to allow others to edit that information.

For some time, industry commentators have been predicting the rise of online applications. Soon, apparently, none of us will have office software installed on our PC; instead we'll all use online programs. However, concerns about security and availability aside, Google Docs & Spreadsheet isn't sophisticated enough to become your main office suite. However, if you ever find yourself in front of a PC that doesn't have any office software installed, it could be a real lifesaver.

For more free online applications, see our 'Top 30 Online Tools' feature on page 124.

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MICROSOFT Office 2007 Professional



£367 inc VAT

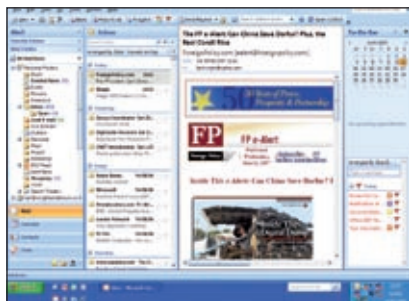
When Microsoft released the previous version of Office in November 2003, reaction was muted. Apart from some behind-the-scenes changes, there seemed to be very little difference between Office 2003 and its predecessor. Many people wondered whether there was really anything more Microsoft, or anyone else, could do to develop office software any further. Well, those people were wrong. The latest version of Microsoft Office has been completely redesigned, so not only does it look and behave differently to its predecessors, it also has some genuinely useful new features. We reviewed Microsoft Office 2007 Professional, which consists of Word, Excel, Outlook and PowerPoint.

THE BLUE RIBBON

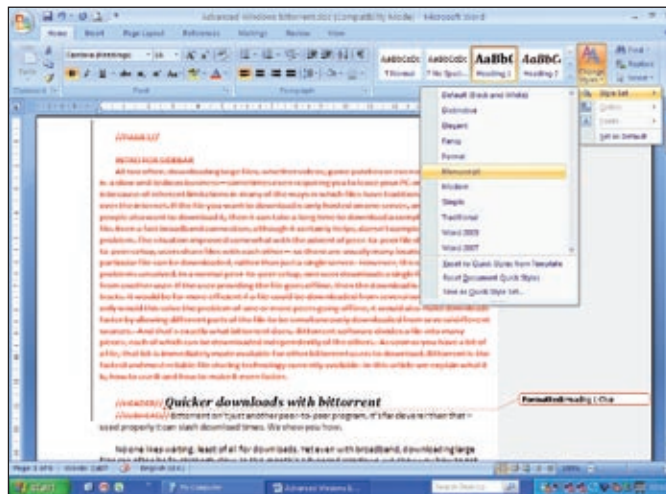
Microsoft Word 2002 had nine menus on the menu bar. Each menu contained up to 19 options, many of which led on to further menus or opened dialog boxes with multiple tabs and commands. Finding what you wanted was often difficult and frustrating. In Office 2007, all these menus have disappeared and been replaced by something called the ribbon.

The ribbon is a single toolbar that runs along the top of Word, Excel and PowerPoint. There are no drop-down menus on the ribbon; features are grouped thematically on tabs. The most commonly used tools can be found on the Home tab. For example, you use the tools on the Page Layout tab to change the way your document is arranged. To navigate between options, you simply click from one tab to another, just as you would in a web browser.

Controls that are not on display, such as the font and paragraph setup options, are generally only a single mouse-click away. Those that are used less often have been moved to context-sensitive toolbars that appear only when required. For instance, the table formatting toolbar appears only when you've placed a table in the document. Finally, there's a new mini-toolbar that appears whenever you highlight a section of text or select an element within a document. It contains formatting tools relevant to the element you have selected, such as bold, italic and underline buttons for highlighted text.



▲ Outlook 2007 doesn't have the new ribbon interface, but it does have a useful to-do bar



◀ Word 2007 has an advanced Track Changes function and new formatting features that help you customise your documents and get them looking exactly as you want

Another new element is the Office button, which sits in the upper left-hand corner, roughly where the file button used to be. Clicking on the Office button reveals the Save and Save As options, the Print menu and other controls for making the document ready for publication.

These changes to Word, Excel and PowerPoint put all the most important controls where they're easy to find, making navigation much simpler than in previous versions.

NEW FILE FORMATS

As well as losing their menus, Word and Excel have undergone several other changes. Other elements common to all three programs include SmartArt, a tool for creating professional-looking graphics, and a handy new zoom tool. Perhaps the biggest change, though, is the introduction of new file formats based on the XML markup language. This produces files that are up to 75 per cent smaller than equivalents created with the old versions. They can also be read without conversion by any application that can read XML, which is useful for businesses and developers. Microsoft has produced a compatibility pack that enables older versions of Office to read and edit the new format.

Also new in Office 2007 is the XML Paper Specification (XPS), another new document format, which is designed to rival Adobe's PDF format. Like PDF files, XPS files can't be edited by other users once they've been created, and they always look the same, no matter what software or computer system they're viewed on. We had no problem viewing XPS documents under Windows Vista, which supports the new format, but installing the XPS plug-in for Windows XP caused Internet Explorer to crash every time we tried to open one of the new files, so PDF is probably safe for a while yet.

WORD AND EXCEL CHANGES

In Word 2007 Microsoft has introduced something called 'building blocks'. These are predefined elements, usually formatting elements that can be used to customise your documents. For instance, Word now comes with styles that be applied to your document. Each style defines the font and point size for normal text and headers, as well as the way elements such as tables are formatted. Other building blocks include specialised text boxes for elements such as pull quotes, cover pages, tables of contents and so on.

The ability to apply advanced formatting to your documents is one of the most impressive things about Word. You can even create two linked text boxes, with text flowing automatically from one to the other. Word's closest competitor, Corel WordPerfect X3, can't do this. It makes Word a capable basic desktop publishing (DTP) program.

Excel also has some useful additions. Perhaps our favourite is the predictive function for formulae. As you type a formula in to a cell, Excel displays a list of all the formulae that match what you're typing. If you see the formula you want, you simply pick it from the list. It's a small thing, but Excel is also good at recognising when you've finished a formula and automatically adding the closing bracket for you. Most other spreadsheets don't do this.

OTHER CHANGES

Most of the other programs haven't been overhauled as radically as Word and Excel. PowerPoint is the only other program that features the Ribbon, rather than traditional menus. In other respects, however, apart from some improvements to text and graphics rendering, it remains largely unchanged.

There have been a couple of worthwhile additions to Outlook. Although it still has all the old drop-down menus, it can finally manage and display RSS feeds (although still not newsgroups), there's a useful new to-do bar and some new mail flagging and organisational tools.

Microsoft Office 2007 is undoubtedly the best-designed and easiest-to-use suite on test. But at this price, it should be. The OEM-only Basic Edition – which is the same as the Professional version but without PowerPoint – costs a far more reasonable £120, but you don't get any support from Microsoft. If support is crucial to you, or you need a presentation program, database and so on, go for the cheaper but equally comprehensive StarOffice.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✓ Lots of good features
- ✗ Too expensive

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows XP (SP2), 500MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 2GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS <http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb>

MICROSOFT Works Suite 2006



£72 inc VAT

Compared with the other office suites in this review, Works Suite 2006 is a funny-looking beast. As well as the standard word processor, spreadsheet and so on, the suite includes home finance software, a journey planner, photo-editing software and an encyclopaedia – and all for well under £100.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

Getting more for less is always good, as long as the quality doesn't suffer for the sake of quantity. For the most part, you can't level that accusation at Microsoft Works Suite. The programs it contains aren't always the latest editions, and they tend to be the basic versions of each application, but they are all useful and well made.

The financial planning software Microsoft Money 2006 has now been superseded by the 2007 edition. Don't let this put you off, though, as it still has all the features you need to track and plan your home finances. You can configure the program to connect to your bank's website and automatically download your statements. This makes keeping track of your spending easy, although the software rather annoyingly downloaded the same statement twice on more than one occasion. This was easy enough to fix, but still irksome. As well as monitoring your bank account and credit cards, Money can also help you keep track of commitments such as mortgages, pensions and insurance policies. It's easy to use and to keep up to date, and its reports function enables you to see exactly how much you spend and on what.

Microsoft Encarta isn't as detailed as its main rival, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but it's still a very good reference work that makes excellent use of the PC's presentational capabilities. As well as text articles, it includes animations, pictures and maps along with video and audio clips. Some of the articles are rather short, but the information is always authoritative and further sources of information are cited.



◀ Encarta is an excellent encyclopedia that makes good use of the PC's multimedia capabilities

Microsoft Digital Image 2006 is a decent photo-editing application. If you already know your way around Adobe Photoshop Elements or Corel Paint Shop Pro, you will find the simple interface, with its non-standard tool buttons, rather frustrating. Less experienced users, however, will benefit from the step-by-step approach. Although not as sophisticated as Adobe's or Corel's image editors, Digital Image does everything most users will need, allowing you to crop, resize, fix red eye and adjust brightness, contrast and so on. It also has some useful autofix functions for complete novices who just want quick results.

AutoRoute is a fairly standard journey planner. Tell it where you are and where you want to go and it will tell you the best route to take. We tried it on some journeys we're familiar with and found it generally reliable. You can get pretty much the same result using the AA website (www.theaa.com), but given that this suite would be good value even without AutoRoute, we're not complaining.

These programs alone would cost around £90 if you bought them individually – more than the whole of Works Suite – and that's before you factor in the office programs themselves.

LONG IN THE TOOTH

The office components of Works Suite are starting to look a bit long in the tooth. Word 2002 was originally released in 2001 as part of the now antiquated Office XP. We're not too bothered by this, however. The logical step, now that Word 2007 is on the market, would be for Microsoft to include Word 2003 in the next release of Works Suite. As we've already said, however, there wasn't that much difference between Word 2002 and Word 2003, at least not that most people would care about.

Works itself, however, is another matter. Works 8 has been included in the last three releases of Works Suite, and compared with some of the budget – or even free – office suites on the market now it no longer cuts much of a dash. Works Spreadsheet is very basic.

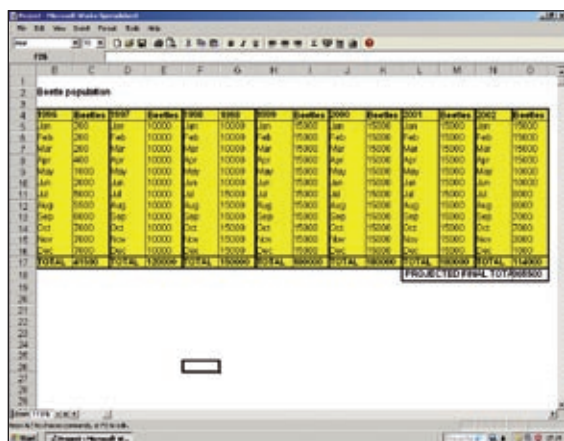
When you try to open Excel workbooks, the Works Spreadsheet can open only one worksheet at a time. If you often work with documents containing many worksheets, this very quickly turns into a royal pain. While Spreadsheet can perform basic maths well enough, many of the useful formulae and functions that Excel can do are beyond it. We're not even talking about particularly complicated functions. For instance, Excel's COUNTIF function, which allows you to count cells that meet the criteria you specify, doesn't work. More demanding jobs, such as converting measurements or performing logic tests, are out of the question. You can get free spreadsheets that can do these things, so why opt for Works?

The database is similarly basic – it's flat rather than relational, so you can't link entries to each other across tables as you can with more sophisticated programs. In its favour, it's easy to use, which is not something you can say of most databases.

OTHER FEATURES

As well as all these programs, you also get a fairly sophisticated calendar, which even imports iCalendar files from Outlook – handy if you want to duplicate your work calendar at home. The suite also comes with lots of templates, which you access through the task launcher. These can help you get started on many different kinds of projects, from greetings cards to financial worksheets. Although they often look a little cheesy, the templates are good enough to help inexperienced users get better results than they could achieve if left to their own devices.

Microsoft Works Suite is excellent value as long as you don't need a sophisticated spreadsheet or database, or any kind of mail or presentation software. The 'extra' programs you get with the suite are fantastic value for home users, but business users should look elsewhere.



▲ Works Spreadsheet is good enough for basic work, but it doesn't support nearly as many formulae as the other spreadsheets here and can only open one workbook at a time

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great selection of programs
- ✓ Good price for what you get
- ✗ Word 2002 is dated

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98 SE, 700MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.microsoft.com/products/works
DETAILS www.amazon.co.uk

COREL WordPerfect Office X3

★★★★★

£138 inc VAT

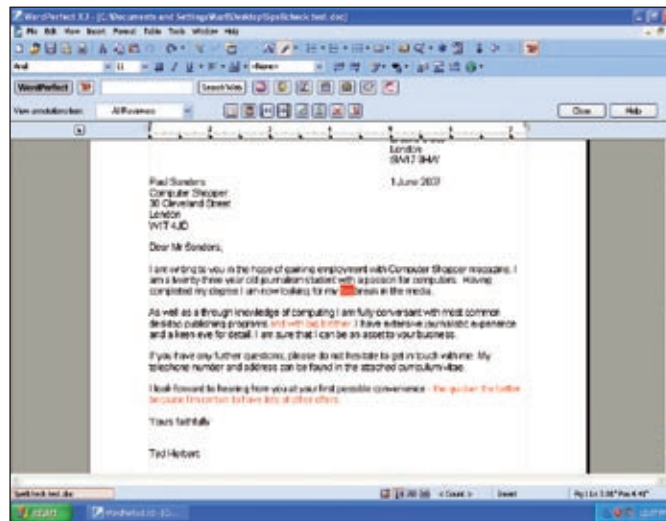
Corel's WordPerfect Office X3 looks a fantastic bargain. It includes a word processor, a spreadsheet and a presentation program. That's the same combination of programs you get in Microsoft Office 2007 Professional, but for less than half the price.

Of course, getting something for a knock-down price is only good if the thing in question does what it's designed to do. This is particularly true for office software: bad office software will make you less, rather than more, productive.

WordPerfect Office gets off to a good start. Both WordPerfect, the word processor, and Quattro, the spreadsheet, can run either in their native mode or in something called Microsoft compatibility mode. In this mode the program's controls are rearranged to be in roughly the same place you would find them in the equivalent Microsoft program. If you're used to Microsoft Office, this makes it much easier to get used to Corel's software.

Quattro doesn't feel that much different from Excel. Open the two programs side by side and you'd be forgiven for not noticing which was which. The similarities are more than skin deep, too. Quattro matched Excel function for function – the only spreadsheet in the test of which this can be said. It's not perfect, though. Calculating percentages was a real palaver; we had to open the formula composer and use the quotient function. In Excel you do a simple division and format the cell in question to show a percentage. We were also slightly nonplussed when the program forced us to install a default printer in order to publish files to PDF; none of the other programs made us do this.

A few minor gripes aside, however, we really enjoyed using Quattro. It has all the features you could want from a spreadsheet. We put it through its paces, carrying out some demanding calculations and designing a table to track production in our (sadly fictitious) car factory. Quattro took it all in its stride. The current edition can even create



◀ The sophisticated Track Changes function allows you to see who has made what changes to a document and to decide whether or not to accept them

pivot tables (a means of extracting specific information from a large table).

WORDPERFECT AND PRESENTATIONS

WordPerfect is one of the oldest word processors on the market, having been around in one form or another since 1980. Corel makes a virtue of the fact that WordPerfect has been designed to imitate Microsoft Word almost perfectly. In compatibility mode the program looks almost exactly like Word, and it supports the standard .doc Word format, as you'd expect.

WordPerfect isn't just a good copycat, though; it has a few tricks of its own. Most impressive of these is the ability to convert a PDF into a WordPerfect file, allowing you to edit the text and images in the PDF document. Once you've finished editing, you can resave the document as a PDF. The feature didn't work perfectly, as it sometimes messed up the formatting of the document and substituted a font it didn't have for one that wasn't much like it. Overall, however, it worked well.

Many of WordPerfect's customers are business users, and it seems to be popular in the legal profession. One thing that business users find most useful in a word processor is a good Track Changes function. This allows an editor or final approver to see exactly who has made what changes to a document and to accept or reject each change. WordPerfect's Track Changes function is particularly good, allowing the editor to see changes made by each user individually or by all users. There's also a good word count function that allows the user to count only the words in a highlighted selection of text.

Less impressive is the word processor's macro function. Unlike some of the word processors in this test, WordPerfect has a macro recorder, which means you don't have to write macros by hand. However, assigning a key combination to a macro you've recorded is over-complicated and requires you to fiddle around in the Options menu.

If the design of your documents is important, you'll be pleased with WordPerfect's

layout features. These aren't as sophisticated as those in Microsoft Word – for instance, it's not possible to make text flow automatically from one text box to another – but the program is still sophisticated enough to create professional-looking documents.

If you have more demanding design needs, you could use Presentations, Corel's answer to PowerPoint. This competent program does everything you'd expect, making it possible to design good-looking presentations. Our only complaint is that converting PowerPoint documents to their native format takes ages.

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

This is the first time Corel has included a mail client in its office suite, so we were excited to try it out. WordPerfect Mail is a fairly light program, unlike Outlook, which often feels cumbersome and seems to need lots of memory. At first glance everything that a mail client should have seems to be present and correct. There's the email function, a calendar, a contacts book and an RSS reader for keeping up with the latest headlines. There's no to-do list, but apart from that WordPerfect mail seems to offer the same features as Microsoft Outlook.

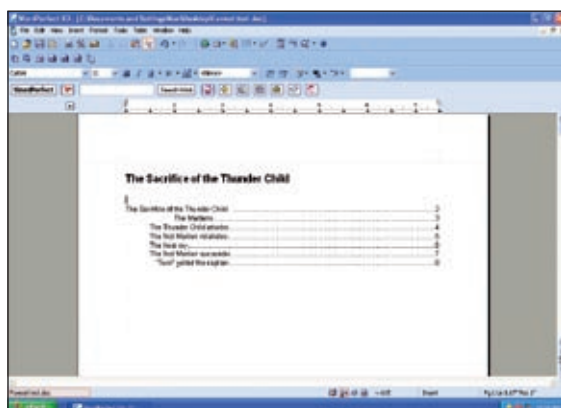
Sadly, when we dug a little deeper it became evident that this program lacks any direct support for Microsoft Exchange. If you want to connect to an Exchange server, you can use either the IMAP protocol or POP forwarding. Both are imperfect solutions, particularly as Mail downloads only your inbox from an IMAP server and not all your other folders. If you want to use this mail client at home with a Yahoo! or Hotmail account it's fine, but it's not as good as Outlook and not suitable for most businesses.

This is a very good office suite at an incredible price. Even with our reservations about the mail client, WordPerfect Office X3 is excellent value for money.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Polished, professional software
- ✓ Cheaper than Office
- ✗ Email client has limitations

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98 SE, 466MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 575MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.corel.com
DETAILS www.corel.com



▲ Corel Write can create a table of contents for your documents that makes them easier for readers to navigate



OPENOFFICE OpenOffice.org 2.1



Free



OpenOffice is based on StarOffice, an office suite developed by software giant Sun Microsystems. Although it continues to develop StarOffice as a commercial product, Sun decided to publish the suite's code and allow other developers to work on it to produce a completely free alternative to Microsoft Office. The result of this experiment is OpenOffice. There are no adverts and you don't have to enter a 'competition' – it's free, and that's it.

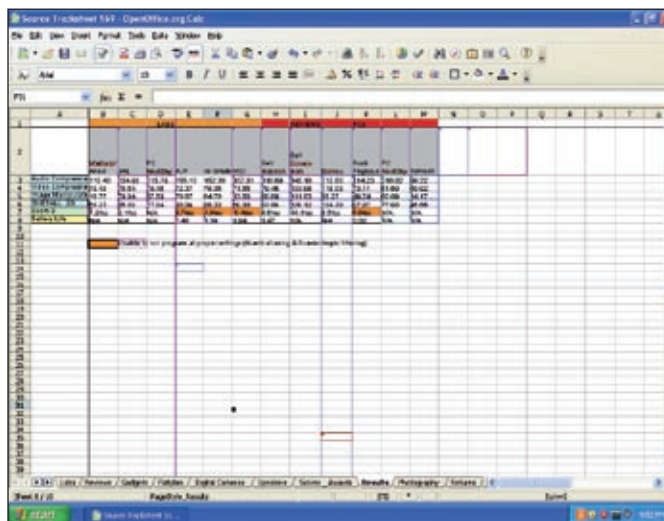
You may think that free stuff is often rubbish. Happily, this isn't the case with OpenOffice. The suite consists of a word processor, a spreadsheet, a drawing program, a database, a presentation program and a program for performing mathematical formulae. That would be an impressively comprehensive list even in a commercial program, but considering that this free it's absolutely staggering.

WORD UP

The program performed well in all our standard tests. We opened a word processor document that contained intentional spelling errors. OpenOffice underlined them all and, when we right-clicked on the underlined word, suggested the correct alternative. The word processor's word count feature is able to count both an entire document or just a selected body of text. This is important for anyone who writes as part of their job and needs to keep within a particular word limit.

We were also pleased to discover that the macro function in OpenOffice Writer worked perfectly, allowing us to record and play a macro that automatically created a template letter. Whenever we tried to do the same thing in StarOffice Writer, the program crashed. Nor do you need to worry that Writer is a cut-down word processor that can't apply more than basic formatting. Just like Microsoft Word it provides a wide selection of fonts, allows you to choose from around 20 text styles and can easily and quickly generate tables of contents and indices.

► OpenOffice Calc coped well in our tests, even recognising and retaining links between cells in different worksheets



The spreadsheet Calc is equally impressive. It coped well in all our tests, from basic maths to logic tests and more complicated formulae and functions. The only thing it had trouble with was automatically converting one unit of measurement to another. As you'd expect, Calc supports the standard .xls Excel file format, although not Excel 2007's newer .xlsx format. Calc also allows you to export to PDF without forcing you to install a default printer first.

DRESS TO IMPRESS

OpenOffice also comes with the presentation program Impress. This looks and feels a lot like Microsoft PowerPoint as it was before Office 2007, and can open and work with PowerPoint files. Impress comes with a number of templates, each of which can be customised to include such things as transitions between slides, different colour themes and different types of page (cost analysis slides, slides showing the next steps in a process and so on). This makes achieving a specific look, and communicating the necessary information, relatively simple. As well as saving in its own file format and PowerPoint's, Impress can export files to PDF and, even more impressively, as Adobe Flash movies.

Draw is a vector drawing program that, in theory, has all the tools you need to create attractive illustrations and accurate diagrams. However, we found that bezier nodes were even more difficult to use here than usual. Compared with using other drawing programs, we found it

harder to prevent a line moving when we moved its node, which made it difficult to alter the line on one side of the node without altering the line on the other side. Like Impress, Draw exports to both PDF and Flash movie format.

Finally, there's Base, the suite's database. Compatible with the standard SQL database programming language, this relational database is impressively versatile. You can create linked objects across several tables and search on various criteria. There's also a report wizard to help you produce reports that analyse the information held in your database.

OpenOffice can feel a little old-fashioned, particularly next to the flashy Microsoft Office 2007 Professional. However, it has an excellent selection of programs, and most of the problems of older versions, such as the clunky word count feature, have been dealt with. This free suite couldn't help but be good value, and the fact that it's also an excellent product clinches the matter and earns OpenOffice a Best Buy award.

SUMMARY

- ✓ An excellent office suite – for free
- ✓ Good document-checking features
- ✗ Macro function kept crashing

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 800MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.openoffice.org
DETAILS www.openoffice.org

SUN MICROSYSTEMS StarOffice 8



£47 inc VAT

StarOffice is a budget office suite that comes with exactly the same selection of applications as OpenOffice. The programs have the same names, and look and work identically to their OpenOffice equivalents.

The differences between the two products are minimal. StarOffice comes with a few extras that OpenOffice lacks, but most of these will be of interest only to business users. They include support for the business database

Adabas, a collection of business templates and document samples, and a professionally compiled spellchecker. You also get a collection of clip art images, for what that's worth.

The main difference between the two office suites is that StarOffice is backed and supported by Sun Microsystems. If you have a problem with the suite, you can get in touch with Sun and expect the company to help you find a solution. If you have a problem with OpenOffice, you can ask the open-source community for help. There's a good chance someone will be able and willing to assist, but there's no guarantee. If you are the IT director responsible for the productivity of a company's employees, this is an important distinction.

If we were reviewing for a business audience only, StarOffice would get at least one star more than it does. For home users, though, there's simply no point in spending £47 on this product when you can download OpenOffice for free.

SUMMARY

- ✓ A good office suite
- ✗ It's OpenOffice, but costs £47
- ✗ Macro function crashes

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 320MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>
DETAILS <http://sun.com/staroffice>

ABILITY

Ability Office Professional 4

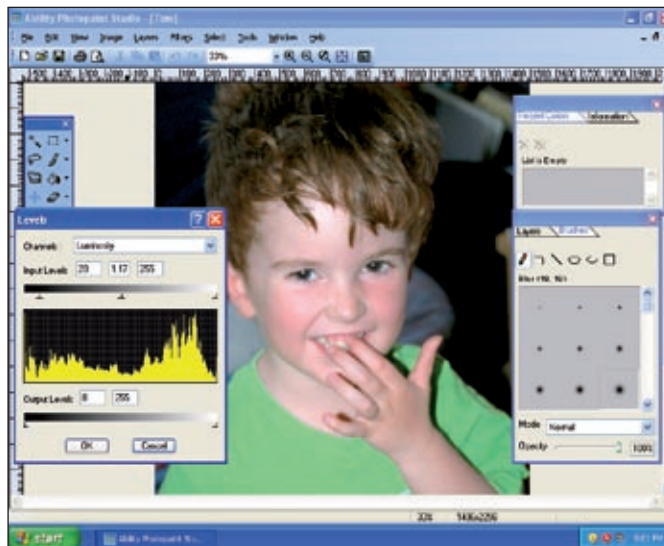


£36 inc VAT

Ability Office has been around for some time. It's made by a British company and, as well as being distributed under its own name, is also sold by Tesco as Tesco Office. You can see why Tesco chose to endorse Ability Office: it's an incredibly comprehensive office suite for an amazingly good price. It consists of a word processor, a spreadsheet, a presentation program, a database and an image-editing program, all for just £36 including VAT.

The word processor, Ability Write, looks and feels like Microsoft Word as it was before Word 2007. All Word's main functions work in Ability Write, too. You can format text easily, check your spelling as you type – although when you open a Word document it doesn't automatically spot errors, so you have to run the spellcheck manually – and inserting tables and elements such as pictures works just as you'd expect. There's also a good customisable autocorrect function, which you can program to recognise and fix words you often misspell. The macro function is very basic, though. You have to write macros manually, although the help file provides a good tutorial.

Ability Spreadsheet is equally capable. Entering and formatting data works just as you would expect. The program supported all the Excel formulae and functions we tried, with the exception of converting measurements. We were a little frustrated to find that the currency



◀ Ability Photopaint has some fairly advanced image-editing features. For example, you can adjust the amount of light by tweaking levels of luminosity

setting is taken from Windows' Regional and Language settings, limiting us to working in pounds; if your business works in several countries, this could be frustrating. It would also be nice if the program autofilled the closing bracket for you when you reached the end of a formula, but this is a minor niggle.

The Ability database can save files in its own native format and in Microsoft Access format. It's easy to create tables, forms and queries to build a fully relational database. The suite also includes a presentation program that looks and feels like PowerPoint and supports PowerPoint file formats. Photopaint Studio is a basic but adequate image editor, while Photoalbum is an image organiser that helps you to sort and find your digital photos. It's OK, but the free Google Picasa is better. Finally, Ability Draw is a decent

vector drawing program that's easy to use if you already know how to use vector draw programs.

Ability is a very good office suite. It's not as sophisticated as Microsoft Office, but it's also a fraction of the price. This suite misses out on an award only because it's hard to compete with the equally good, and free, OpenOffice. **CS**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good, competent set of office apps
- ✓ Very cheap for whole office suite
- ✗ Spreadsheet uses local currency

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98, Pentium processor, 32MB RAM, 25MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.ability.com
DETAILS <http://uk.insight.com>

★ BEST BUY						
MANUFACTURER	ABILITY	COREL	MICROSOFT	MICROSOFT	OPENOFFICE.ORG	SUN MICROSYSTEMS
PRODUCT	Ability Office Professional 4	WordPerfect Office X3	Office 2007 Professional	Works Suite 2006	OpenOffice.org 2.1	StarOffice 8
RATING	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★
WORD PROCESSOR	Ability Write	Corel WordPerfect X3	Microsoft Word 2007	Microsoft Word 2002	OpenOffice Writer	StarOffice Writer
.doc support	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PDF export	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Spell/grammar check	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Autocomplete/spellchecker	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Selective word count	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Contents, indexes, etc	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Headers and footers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macro support	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mailmerge	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Version tracking/track changes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SPREADSHEET	Ability Spreadsheet	Quattro X3	Excel 2007	Works Spreadsheet	OpenOffice Calc	StarOffice Calc
.xls support	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (limited)	Yes	Yes
PDF export	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Maximum size (rows x columns)	65,536x256	1,000,000x18,276	1,000,000x16,384	16,384x256	65,536x256	65,536x256
Basic maths functions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Complex formulae	Yes	Yes	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes
Support for Excel formulae	Yes (mostly)	Yes (mostly)	Yes	Yes (limited)	Yes (with some exceptions)	Yes (with some exceptions)
Context-sensitive cell reference	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macro support	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Filtering/sorting	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (limited)	Yes	Yes
Charts/graphs	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
MAIL CLIENT	None	Mail X3	Outlook 2007	None	None	None
Exchange support	N/A	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
POP3 support	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
iMAP support	N/A	Yes (limited)	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
Junk mail filter	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
Calendar	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
Task list	N/A	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
Contacts	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
PRESENTATION PROGRAM	Ability Presentation	Presentation X3	PowerPoint 2007	None	OpenOffice Impress	StarOffice Impress
.ppt support	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
PDF export	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Graphic/diagram creation	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Dynamic content	Yes (limited)	Yes (limited)	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Tables/charts	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
DATABASE	Ability Database	None	Access 2007	Works Database	OpenOffice Base	StarOffice Base
Sorting/filtering	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Form creation	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reporting	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macro support	Yes	N/A	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
BUYING INFORMATION						
Price including VAT	£36	£138	£367	£72	Free	£47
Supplier	http://uk.insight.com	www.corel.com	www.dabs.com	www.amazon.co.uk	www.openoffice.org	http://uk.insight.com
Details	www.ability.com	www.corel.com	http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb	www.microsoft.com/products/works	www.openoffice.org	http://sun.com/staroffice/